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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TBILISI 001409

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MOPS](#) [RS](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: GEORGIA: INCIDENTS RAISE CONCERNS, MECHANISMS MEET

REF: A. TBILISI 1312
[B](#). TBILISI 1358
[C](#). GENEVA0592

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary and comment. Deputy Foreign Minister Nalbandov told the Ambassador the government is concerned about a spate of recent incidents, especially as the August 7 first anniversary of Georgia's 2008 war with Russia approaches. An explosive device killed the father of a family of IDPs that had just visited their abandoned home in Akhagori July 30; shooting erupted near the South Ossetian administrative boundary line July 29; six mysterious explosions occurred in Pakhulani outside Abkhazia July 27, with no obvious target; a South Ossetian man was detained July 22 or 23 and remains in Georgian custody; and a Georgian man was detained in South Ossetia July 25, then released July [27](#). None of these incidents led to escalation, but the EUMM called an urgent Joint Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (JIPRM) meeting for South Ossetia on July 31; the South Ossetians attended, but the Russians did not. The Abkhazia JIPRM met for the second time on July 28 and had a substantive and respectful (although not necessarily productive) discussion, and the biweekly meetings will continue. The sudden uptick in incidents is troubling. Although the JIPRMs show potential as a useful forum to reduce tension, all observers will need to remain watchful as August 7 approaches. End summary and comment.

RECENT INCIDENTS

[1](#)2. (SBU) In a briefing for the diplomatic corps July 31, Acting Foreign Minister Alexander Nalbandov provided the following information. On July 30, a family of internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Akhagori traveled from their settlement in Tserovani, in Georgia-controlled territory, to visit their home in Akhagori. On the return trip, after crossing the South Ossetian administrative boundary back into undisputed Georgian territory, the car stopped in Dusheti. As they exited the car, an explosive device inside the car went off, killing the 59-year-old father. A Ministry of Internal Affairs (MoIA) official expressed the belief that the device was placed in the car while it was in Akhagori, although he did not know who placed it; he said an investigation was underway. Nalbandov also informed the group that an unexploded bomb was found near the Zugdidi police station on the same day. An EUMM military advisor later told PolOff that the bomb consisted of plastic explosives with a detonator, and that it had been found by local police, who showed photos of the device to EUMM personnel.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Nalbandov expressed serious concern to the gathered diplomats about the shooting that occurred the evening of July 29 near Zemo Nikozi and Zemo Khviti, just south of the South Ossetian administrative boundary. He said that machine

guns, mortars, and other firearms had been fired at the villages, although no one was injured. Georgian officials tried to use the "hotline" recently established in conjunction with the JIPRM for South Ossetia to contact Russian officials, who did not respond. South Ossetian de facto authorities released on the internet allegations that the July 29 shooting originated in Georgian-controlled territory and targeted Tskhinvali. EUMM officials told diplomatic colleagues in a July 30 briefing that they had confirmed the shooting from South Ossetia into undisputed Georgia with local villagers, but could not confirm the South Ossetian allegations.

¶4. (SBU) At the EUMM briefing, officials provided information about six explosions in Pakhulani, just outside Abkhazia, on July 27; no one was injured. EUMM monitors observed six craters of considerable size -- five meters across and two meters deep -- but have been unable to determine what caused them, and they have also been unable to identify a clear target. One EUMM official speculated that the incident somehow derived from criminal groups growing frustrated with the increasingly strict control of movements across the administrative boundary imposed by Russian Border Guards.

¶5. (SBU) EUMM officials also noted two recent detentions around South Ossetia. According to Georgian sources, on July 22 an armed South Ossetian militia member was detained by Georgian authorities in Kere, outside South Ossetia; according to the South Ossetian version of events, a South Ossetian was detained on July 23 in Ortevi, inside South Ossetia (both villages are on the administrative boundary, east of Tskhinvali). He remains in Georgian custody. The

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second detention occurred on July 25, when a Georgian man was detained in Muguti (just inside the boundary, southwest of Tskhinvali); he was released back into undisputed Georgian territory at Ergneti on July 27. He made no complaints of mistreatment while in South Ossetian custody.

¶6. (C) At the briefing for the diplomatic corps, Nalbandov asked everyone to ask their governments to encourage Russia to comply with its international commitments in an effort to restore a stable environment, especially in the lead up to the war's anniversary. Afterwards, Nalbandov asked to see the Ambassador privately. He conveyed his own and the Foreign Minister's concern that these recent incidents represent a significant increase in tension. He noted with surprise and concern that they occurred directly following Vice President Biden's visit to Georgia,

ABKHAZIA MECHANISM MEETS

¶7. (SBU) In accordance with the biweekly schedule agreed at the first JIPRM meeting (ref A), representatives of the UN, EUMM, Russia, Georgia, and the Abkhaz de facto authorities gathered in Gali on July 28. The Georgian government originally wanted to send ten representatives, but after an intervention by the EUMM, they agreed to limit their delegation to four individuals (the same size as the other delegations). EUMM officials reported the meeting, chaired by UN Special Representative Johan Verbeke, proceeded in a positive, polite and diplomatic spirit, and all sides agreed to continue with a regular schedule of biweekly meetings, with the next planned for August 11. The Georgian side raised the question of the location of the meetings, proposing that they alternate between Gali and Zugdidi (the first two have been held in Gali). Abkhaz de facto "deputy foreign minister" Maxim Gundjia did not object in principle to alternating locations, but he asked that the venue remain Gali through the Abkhaz "presidential" elections in December, explaining that sending representatives outside Abkhazia would be very sensitive in this campaign period. The Georgians agreed to continue meeting in Gali for now.

¶8. (SBU) Although the group did not make any concrete progress on specific issues, they did engage in a substantive exchange, in particular on the state of the Abkhaz administrative boundary crossing regime. The Russian and Abkhaz participants explained that currently there was only one crossing point they considered legal: the Rukhi Bridge, near Zugdidi. (Although other points are still being used, Abkhaz de facto authorities officially consider them illegal.) They also explained, however, that they were considering opening as many as five other points to pedestrian traffic; the Rukhi Bridge would remain the only "legal" crossing for goods and vehicles. At the same time, the Russian representatives admitted that it would probably take some time -- perhaps two to three months -- to establish a consistent enforcement regime.

¶9. (SBU) The Russian and Abkhaz participants explained their approach to the documents required for crossing. Gali residents would be allowed to cross by showing either a Soviet-era passport or an Abkhaz "passport." Residents of other areas of Abkhazia, however, would need to receive special permission from the de facto authorities to cross, and they would only receive that permission by having a specific need for the travel. Likewise, travelers from Qspecific need for the travel. Likewise, travelers from outside Abkhazia would be allowed to enter Gali by showing one of the same two documents, but anyone interested in traveling beyond Gali would need to receive permission to do so. The Russian representatives explained the July 22 incident, in which a bus and a minibus were stopped (ref B), as an enforcement action in line with these requirements. They insisted that the incident did not constitute the detention of the travelers, but rather an administrative action akin to a traffic stop, in which a police officer might check a driver's documents. They did not provide information on the fate of those detained on July 22 who reportedly lost their Georgian passports, however. Anyone attempting to cross with improper documentation would be given a warning on the first "offense," then a fine on the second.

¶10. (C) The Abkhaz participants also raised the February 2007 disappearance of David Sigua, an ethnic Georgian who worked on elections in Gali whom the de facto authorities believe Georgian authorities abducted. They expressed interest in reopening the case and asking the UN and EUMM to get involved. The EUMM representatives indicated they had no authority to conduct investigations, and that in any case they currently have no access to the Abkhaz side. The EUMM

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Deputy Head of Mission, Gilles Janvier, suggested that the Abkhaz are trying to use this case to build some kind of public relations campaign, like the South Ossetians have done with the three disappearances from October 2008, but in a less confrontational manner.

SOUTH OSSETIA MECHANISM MEETS

¶11. (SBU) In response to some of the above incidents, on July 30 the EUMM sought to arrange an urgent meeting of the JIPRM for South Ossetia. As noted in ref C, the South Ossetian de facto authorities have indicated they will only participate in further meetings of the JIPRM once the October 2008 disappearances have been resolved, but they did agree to meet on July 31 in Ergneti. Although the Russians agreed to meet as well, they did not appear for the meeting.

ANNIVERSARY PROVOCATIONS?

¶12. (C) At the EUMM briefing, Janvier reported that the Ganmukhuri Patriots Camp, located just outside the Abkhaz boundary but north of the Enguri River, had been restored in recent weeks after being burned to the ground during the war and would reportedly reopen on August 7 (the anniversary of the beginning of the war). He added that the EUMM understood

there was a possibility that President Saakashvili would attend the reopening. British Ambassador Denis Keefe noted that Ganmukhuri has been the site of several unfortunate incidents and suggested that any event there on August 7, particularly involving Saakashvili, could be perceived by the Russians and Abkhaz as provocative. At the Nalbandov briefing, German Ambassador Patricia Flor asked Nalbandov about this report, and he had no information about it.

COMMENT: ALL EYES ON THE BOUNDARIES

¶13. (C) Coming after several weeks of relative calm, the sudden rash of incidents, including one fatality, is indeed troubling. Many observers have wondered about the possibility of one of the parties seeking to use the occasion of the upcoming anniversary to provoke a new round of incidents, and such strange incidents as the explosions in Pakhulni, or the targeting of a family of IDPs, could be designed solely to create a tense atmosphere. If true, the reopening of the Ganmukhuri camp on August 7, especially if it involves Saakashvili, could also come across as provocative. The fact that the JIPRMs are operating, if not completely smoothly, is encouraging, because they may provide a useful vehicle for addressing any additional incidents.

TEFFT